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African American Vernacular English: Roots and Branches

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> I have crossed an ocean / I have lost a tongue / From the roots of the old / one / A new one has sprung.
>
> Grace Nichols, *I is a Long Memoried Woman*

Introduction

I would like to set the mood and theme for this essay by presenting the first two verses of a beautiful but little-known song by Zulema Casseux, "*American Fruit with African Roots*" (the images in this song were enhanced by a number of slides presented at the symposium).

> We came from a distant land,
> Our lives already planned.
> We came in ships from across the sea,
> Never again, home we'd see.
> And now, we've become,
> American fruit, with African roots.
> Mmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm.
> Our masters saw we worked from morn till night,
> Never given human rights,
> Though years passed, things remain the same,
> Children born with no last names.
> What is to become of these,
> American fruit, with African roots?
> Mmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm.

Although Zulema Casseaux's song deals with African American *people*, we can extend it to the linguistic and cultural traits that they

brought from Africa, and modify her question to read, "What has become of these American Fruit, with African Roots?" The prevalent scholarly view in the first half of this century—resurfacing in a more sophisticated form in recent years—is that African Americans have few if any special linguistic fruit, and that their African roots were destroyed by the devastating experience of slavery. The aptly named Krapp (1924,192–193) argued, for instance, that "not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or Negro syntax can be proved to have other than an English origin." Crum (1940, 111), discussing the Gullah dialect of South Carolina and Georgia, posed the question, "Is it African or English?" and responded, "The answer is very positive: it s almost wholly English—peasant English of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with perhaps a score of African words remaining." Linguists writing more recently have avoided putting their feet in their mouths quite this firmly. But the contention that African American Vernacular English is essentially British settler speech transplanted to America or Southern White Speech transported northward, continues to receive support (Davis 1971, 96; Poplack 2000), whereas Africanists and creolists are dismissed as "substratomaniacs" (Bickerton 1981, 48).

In this essay, fittingly presented in a symposium on "English and Ethnicity," I follow Herskovits (1941), Turner (1949), Stewart (1969), Dillard (1972), and Alleyne (1980) in arguing a contrary point of view: that African American language and culture has distinctive features (fruit)—which link it inexorably with the continent from which African Americans came, and with the synthesizing creolizing experience that they shared with their *brethren* and *sisteren* (as the Jamaican Rastas put it—see Pollard 2000) in the Caribbean.

Though most of my discussion is about African *roots* and Caribbean similarities, I'm fully aware that no living entity, least of all, a language, can remain in a new environment for four centuries without evolving. And I say a little toward the end of my essay about the vibrant *branches* that African American language and culture has developed in the United States, and about what it has taken from and contributed to other ethnic groups. My discussion, therefore, is about both continuities and innovations—roots and branches. Although my focus is on language, I'll begin with other cultural elements since no language exists in a vacuum, and these other elements attest richly to the distinctiveness of African American and especially Gullah ethnic identity.

THE SEA ISLANDS

African and creole ethnic roots are nowhere more evident than in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. These

islands—Johns Island, Edisto, Hilton Head, Daufuskie, and others that most Americans have never even heard of—have been described (by John Szwed of Yale University) as "the most direct repository of living African culture to be found anywhere in North America." The factors that make them so are partly demographic (Africans outnumbered Europeans by as much as ten to one in this former rice and cotton farming region), partly historical (slaves from Africa were brought there until 1858, compared with 1808 in most regions—see Wells 1967 on the historic 1858 arrival of the slave ship *Wanderer*, bearing 400 slaves) and partly geographical (the isolation of the islands—some still accessible only by boat). But the continuities with Africa and the Caribbean are numerous, and clear. When I first went out to the Sea Islands in 1969, as an undergraduate, the linguistic and cultural resemblances with my native Caribbean were so pervasive that I had a sense of returning *home*, and subsequent research has only deepened this impression.

Beginning with examples of folk culture, we might note, for instance, continuities between Africa and the Sea Islands in elaborate patterns of basket weaving (see Rosengarten 1994). These baskets, in their "weave pattern . . . coiling technique, manner of stitching, and . . . use within an agricultural framework" are similar to styles found in Senegal, Nigeria, Togo, Benin, and Ghana (Jones-Jackson 1987, 18). Examples can be found both in early-twentieth-century photos in Edith Dabbs's wonderful (1971) book, *Face of an Island*, and in Patricia Jones-Jackson's (1987) book *When Roots Die*, showing that the tradition is still alive and well on the Sea Islands. Jones-Jackson notes that children on the islands start to learn basket weaving around the age of six. Baskets from the famous Mount Pleasant and other coastal areas are sold daily in Charleston markets and along US Highway 17, just north of Charleston.

In a similar vein are distinctive patterns of woodcarving, such as the graveyard carvings and walking sticks from Georgia. As art historian Robert F. Thompson has noted, these indicate their African sources in their color, surface, pose, detail, facial posture, and subject. The Gullah carvings are comparable to the woodcarvings found among the Djukas—descendants of runaways from slavery—in Suriname, South America. Unlike basketry, however, woodcarving is no longer a widely practiced Sea Island art.

From the viewpoint of African and Caribbean continuities, the double-hitched skirts that one sees in early 1900s photos of Sea Island women in the field are also interesting. The second belt was reported to serve a dual purpose: (i) to lift the skirt off the ground to keep it from getting wet or dirty; (ii) to give the wearer extra strength, which

was reported to derive from an "African superstition" (Dabb 1971). The wearing of double-hitched skirts was also common among Guyanese women doing strenuous work as shown in a late-nineteenth-century woodcut of Guyanese coal-carriers, homeward bound (reprinted in Rickford 1978, 195). Note in both cases, incidentally, the art of carrying large loads on the head without using hands—the baskets in each case supported by a headcloth or *kata*. This word in turn has good African (Twi *kata* = "covering") and Indian (Bhojpuri) etymologies, and is found in West Africa as well as in Antigua and Colombia (Moses 1978, 110). Salikoko Mufwene (personal communication) has told me that the word also occurs (as *kata* or *nkata*) in Kituba and Kiyansi and in some varieties of Kongo (again, for the cloth or grass ring placed between the head and the load).

Colombia and other Caribbean areas also resemble the Sea Islands in patterns of fishing, particularly in the kinds of nets used and the style of casting, which are similar from Colombia and the South Carolina Sea Islands to West Africa. Busnell (1973) reports a West African fishing pattern involving a symbiotic, cooperative relationship between man and dolphin, which is also found on the Sea Islands (compare Jackson et al. 1974). In this pattern, fisherman rap on the sides of their boats in open waters to attract porpoises, which circle and scare fish into tight circles. This makes it easier for the fishermen as they cast their nets, and easier also for porpoises, as escaping fish scurry back out to them after each cast.

In the category of material culture, again, is the use of the large mortar (a hollowed-out block of wood) and pestle (stick) for pounding cassava, plantain, corn, or rice, which is found both in West Africa and the Sea Islands—as shown in photos from Lydia Parrish's (1942) *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*—and also throughout the Caribbean. And among the many funeral customs shared by the Sea Islands and the Caribbean—probably derived from West Africa—are the singing and story telling *wakes* and the tradition of passing babies over the coffin to discourage the deceased's spirit from coming back to haunt them.

The subject of haunts brings us naturally enough to the rich patterns of folklore that still exist on the islands, including the well-known "Brer Rabbit" stories (often compared to the Anasi stories of West Africa and the Caribbean) and the lesser-known stories of "hags" (evils spirits, often in the form of an old women) who enter homes and ride or suck people (especially babies) at night. Interestingly enough, one scholar (Nichols 1983) thought such hags and methods

of catching them (scattering salt or sand for these compulsive creatures to pick up grain by grain or putting salt or pepper in their skins when they shed them) were characteristic of the Sea Islands and Liberia and Sierra Leone but not the Caribbean. This putative difference was thought to provide indirect evidence that the Sea Islands differed from the Caribbean in their demographic sources. But in Guyana, the *hag* as a folklore figure is alive and well—although it is known as an ole *higue*, not *hag*, because of a sound change from [a] to [ai] before [g] which we find in other words (e.g., *baig* for "bag").

Finally, there are various noteworthy patterns of music and religious worship, including spirituals, ring shouts (with rhythmic handclapping and circle dancing—see Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 1998), prayers, and the call and response ("Amen!") tradition. These resemble patterns found in the Caribbean, and are syncretisms or mixtures of West African and European traditions (Herskovits 1941). As Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum note, [shaut] "shout" is an Afro-Asiatic word meaning "dance," and when it's done in the traditional way, the movement is counter-clockwise, as is the movement along the four points of the Kongo cosmogram, which I'll turn to next. Shouts are performed almost every Sunday afternoon in the context of usher marches on John's Island and other South Carolina Sea Islands.

One finds an intriguing configuration of holes—a diamond enclosing a cross—next to each of the supporting posts in the basement of the First African Baptist church in Savannah, Georgia, reputedly the oldest African American church in North America. The holes served as breathing holes for slaves who were secreted in the crawl space underneath the church on their way to freedom in the North via the "underground railroad." But their pattern, as a deacon from the church explained when we visited on an AAAS Learning Expedition in 1999, is that of a "Kongo Cosmogram." I had to go to the Web, to Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, and to Grey Gundaker's (1998) *Signs of Diaspora*, to find out more. As Gundaker notes, "The cosmogram is a visual summary of key concepts of Kongo cosmology [beliefs about the cosmos] that resonate with aspects of cosmologies among other peoples ranging from Angola northward to Edo OluKum worshippers in Nigeria." The cosmogram or dikenga may take several forms, but in its most common form it consists of a cross enclosed in a diamond or a circle. The extremities of the cross, sometimes ending in discs or circles, represent the daily [counterclockwise] movement of the sun, from its rising in the east, to its noontime peak, to its setting in the west and disappearance from view, to its darkest, southern point [midnight], to be broken again by the rising of the sun

in the east. The four moments of the sun also mirror the Bakongo's belief in reincarnation and the continuity of likfe, from birth (E), to the peak of a person's life (N), to death (W), and passage through the underworld (S) until he/she comes back in the name or body of a child, or something else. The horizontal ***kalunga*** line separates the mountain of the living—***ntoto*** (the triangular top of the diamond) from its mirrored counterpart, the inverted mountain of the dead or white clay, ***mpemba***. God is imagined at the top, the dead at the bottom, and the watery kalunga line in between. As Thompson notes in his book, *Flash of the Spirit*, "This Kongo 'sign of the cross' [Yowa] has nothing to do with the crucifixion of the son of God, yet its meaning overlaps the Christian vision. The Bakongo did believe in a Supreme deity, Nzambi Mpungu, but they had their own notions of the indestructibility of the soul. The Kongo cross, [like many surviving Africanisms—Rickford and Rickford 1999] 'passes' itself off as a Christian symbol in a Christian setting, but it stands for the cyclical movement of human souls around its intersecting lines."

Two further comments about these cosmograms in the Georgia Sea Island area: (i) I showed Professor Thompson a copy of the slide I described to you just now, and he was fascinated. The world authority on this subject, he knew nothing of the perfectly preserved cosmograms in this Savannah church. There is a partial cosmogram on a broken brick on the Levi Jordan plantation in Texas (do a search for "Kongo Cosmogram" on Google or any other search engine, and it'll come up), but the ones in the First African church are numerous (they recur at every supporting post), and whole, perfectly preserved. (ii) Kongo cosmograms are found elsewhere in the African Diaspora, including Jamaica, at the Sam Sharpe monument in Heroes Park, Kingston, which I visited on another African and African American studies Learning Expedition in 2000. They are also found in Cuba and Brazil, where there were heavy importations of Kongo and Angolan slaves. As in the Kongo, they are often found on the ground, marking a sacred spot on which one stands to make an oath, or sing, and draw a sacred point.

Striking as these varied patterns of folklore, folk culture, and religious belief and practice are, the richest fruit on the Sea Islands—from the viewpoint of a linguist, at least—is its distinctive Gullah dialect, the creole or vernacular English of the region. As I noted earlier, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century scholars had felt that Gullah had few if any African roots—maybe a score of African words at most. But Lorenzo Dow Turner—one of the earliest African American linguists—spent *fifteen* years doing fieldwork and library research that

blew these earlier misconceptions away. In his 1949 book, *Africanisms in Gullah Dialect*, Turner listed 4,000 Gullah words that had plausible African etymologies. Most of them were personal nicknames (also known at *pet names* or *basket names*) used among family and friends, in contrast to English names, which they used at school and with strangers (like earlier Gullah scholars, who did not remain on the island long enough to get beyond formalities). Two examples from Turner's extended list are *aba* and *abako*. In the case of *aba*, one source is the Fante (Gold Coast) word a_3ba_3, a personal name corresponding to the Twi *ya*, "name given to a girl born on Thursday."

In addition to the personal nicknames (discussed in Mufwene 1985) Turner also found about 400 other African derived words used in daily conversation. Some of these such as *tote* and *gumbo*, are widespread throughout the United States, but you may not have been aware of their African pedigree. Others, such as *bakra* and *nana* ("white man" and "grandmother" respectively) are better known in the South and the Caribbean.

Turner also found a smaller but intriguing set of African forms used in prayers, stories, and songs, such as the words na_3na_1, $tu:_1$, and $gbang_3$ (with West African coarticulated *gb* stop) in this Vai-Gullah song: "New rice and okra / na_3na_1, na_3na_1 / Beat rice $tu:_1$ $gbang_3$, $gbang_3$ / na_3na_1, na_3na_1."

This last song, mixing as it does both English and West African words, will serve as a good entrée to the further point that Turner wanted to make: that Gullah was grammatically similar to both African languages and to Afro-English dialects spoken in West Africa and the Caribbean. When speakers of different languages develop a mixed, often simplified lingua franca to communicate among themselves, it is known as a pidgin. When that pidgin is learned natively, for instance, by children of Yoruba and Ibo slaves born on a South Carolina plantation, it expands in grammatical resources to meet the need of a primary language, and is known at that stage as a creole. One of the striking features of such creoles, particularly in the Atlantic, is how *much* they resemble each other. Although Louisiana creole and Gullah use words from different European languages (French and English respectively), they are similar partly because of common West African *grammatical* roots.

To exemplify some of the grammatical structures of Gullah, I introduce some Gullah speakers and discuss significant sentences that they used.

Let's start with Wallace Quarterman, born a slave in Georgia in 1844, who was an invaluable source of information to both Parrish

and Turner in the 1930s. The following sentence is from a 1935 interview recorded by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle that was gathering dust in the Library of Congress until it was rediscovered recently (See Bailey et al. 1991). Quarterman has just described the moment when the "big gun shot"—when a fleet of fifty Union vessels steamed into Port Royal, firing on weak Confederate forces on Hilton Head and Bay Point and signaling the end of slavery—the "day of Jubliee"—for the slaves. In his gripping first-person account of this historic moment, Quarterman states that he relayed a message from the massa to the overseer in the fields to "turn the people loose." After this, in his dramatic words:

> de people dem t'row 'way dey hoe dem. Dey t'row 'way dey hoe, an' den dey call we all up you know an', an' gi' we all freedom 'cause we jus' as much free as dem.

Two linguistic features of note in this extract are: (i) the use of a third person plural pronoun form (*dem*), suffixed to the noun to form the plural (*dey hoe dem*); and (ii) the non-differentiation of pronouns used as subject, object, and possessive: *dey* hoe, gi' *we*, instead of the case marked forms "their" and "us" respectively. Both features are found in Jamaican, Guyanese, and other Caribbean creoles, and resemble grammatical features found in Yoruba, Ibo, and Ewe (Turner 1949, 223–229).

The next speaker I'd like to discuss briefly is Mrs. Queen, whom I interviewed myself in 1970. She was born around 1886. One of the many linguistic riches I got from her was this sentence:

> My aunt useta live in Washington, wa build da house over dey, da house wa Rufus *de* in.

The italicized *de*—equivalent to "is," but used only in locative phrases—seems at first to be nothing more than a reduced from of the English "there," but it has more plausible West African etymologies in Twi and Ewe, where there's a verb *de* with the meaning or function of "be" (Allsopp 1996, 188; Cassidy LePage 1980,144–145).

The next speakers are a couple, whom I refer to as Mr. and Mrs. Hope (also interviewed by me in 1970, and like Mrs. Queen, now deceased). They were financially poor, but linguistically rich. Here's a sample of

Mrs. Hope's speech:

> Yeah, he *does be* up an' Ø cut wood sometime, an'Ø go in de wood, Ø get lil wood and all. And he Ø use dese muss (moss) fuh tobacco. . . . He *does use* dese moss. [II:266–268]

Note in particular her use of an unstressed *does* ("He *does* use dese muss") to encode habitual aspect, the fact that something happens regularly. Turner's 1949 book did not include any examples of this form, only of a *da* form, as in:

> dem ca' um gi'de young people wuh da wuk dey (265)
> (They carried it for the young people who usually work here)

Now I encountered a few examples of this *da* (which Turner, 213–214 linked to African sources) in the 1970s, but *does* was more frequent. *Does* was itself on its way out—it was used only by the oldest speakers, and even they typically used it only in reduced forms, like *oes*, and *s*, and sometimes they left it out, as in the sample above. The Sea Island kids did not use *does* at all, so that where Mrs. Hope might alternate between "He does use dis moss" and "He Ø use this moss," the children used only "He Ø use this moss." I interrupt this saga of changes for now, but I return to it presently, because it forms a backdrop without which the development of forms in urban African Vernacular English cannot be fully understood.

U.S. MAINLAND-INNER CITIES

When it comes to the language and culture of African Americans on the U.S. Mainland, particularly in the urban areas of the north and west, the belief that African and/or creole roots have been lost is even more pervasive. Clearly, Oakland, California, or St. Paul, Minneapolis, are not the same as Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, or Harris Neck, Georgia. But the African American populations in these cities are not as rootless and ahistorical as some would have us believe; there *are* connections between the American cities and islands, and between them both and the Caribbean and Africa. They are not usually evident on the surface, however, and require an informed comparative perspective to reveal themselves.

Let's take, for instance, the case of invariant habitual *be*, as in this sample of speech from Foxy Boston, a thirteen-year old girl from East

Palo Alto, California, whom we recorded a few years ago. Here she is talking about her dreams:

I *be* wakin' up an I be slurpin, I *be* goin'. DANG, THA'S SERIOUS!

The uninflected *be* in these sentences is one of the most distinctive features of urban African American Vernacular English—and is adequately translatable into Standard English only with some awkwardness. For instance, the slogan that Arsenio Hall, the black talk show host, used to use on his show, "Arsenio Hall—we *be* having a ball!" would be, in Standard English, "Arsenio Hall—we are usually having a ball!" (That just doesn't ring right, does it?). Well for years, people had wondered where this uninflected habitual *be* came from, but no convincing answers had emerged. Irish and Irish-English had been mentioned as possible sources, but the process of transmission and development remained problematic.

However, one of the ongoing changes on the Sea Islands that I was able to witness in the early 1970s was the emergence of *be* as Gullah's primary habitual marker. This seemed to me to be a recapitulation of a process that had happened earlier and more generally on the U.S. Mainland, and I was able to hypothesize a series of interrelated steps in the process, which helped to solve the puzzle of *be*'s origin.

You may recall from what I said about the Sea Island verb forms earlier that their former habitual marker, *da*, had changed to *does*, and that *does* itself was being reduced to zero. Well, while all this was going on, the *de* that the very oldest speakers also used in certain sentences, for instance between *does* and a preposition, had also changed more generally to *be*. When *does* was finally eroded, this *be* form came to mark the habitual meaning formerly carried by *does*. It may sound a bit confusing, but the following example will help to summarize and clarify the process:

a. He *da de* up an cut wood sometimes
b. He *does de* up and cut wood sometimes (da → does)
c. He *does be* up and cut wood sometimes (locative de → be)
d. He Ø *be* up and cut wood sometimes (does → Ø)

Stage a is attested only in books from earlier periods, like Turner's; the older speakers whom I recorded in 1970 showed evidence of stages b and c and occasionally d; the youngest speakers were almost exclusively d. Overall, the development of *be* is a part of the general process

of decreolization—evolution *away* from creole roots *toward* the forms and conventions of Standard English—which has been going on in other areas of Gullah grammar, and in the Caribbean creoles. Several other central features of African American Vernacular English represent decreolization at work, as we'll see later. One case in which the African and creole roots of inner-city forms are visible only through their Sea Island and Caribbean connections involves the use of *say* as a complementizer, equivalent to Standard English "that," as in this sentence which I recorded from a thirty-one-year old man in Philadelphia:

They told me *say* they couldn't get it in time.

Now at first it's easy to interpret this as derived from English *say* (equivalent to "They told me, they said"). But on the Sea Islands, as in the Caribbean, the complementizer is always *say*, uninflected, and it's used, not only with *tell*, but also with verbs like *know*, *think*, and *believe*, which refer to cognitive processes, as in Sarah Grant's comment:

You wouldn believe *say* is a colored woman own that house.

As it turns out, Twi and other West African languages use a native form *se* as a complementizer (Allsopp 1996, 489; Cassidy 1961, 63; Dillard 1972, 121), much as the Gullah and creole speakers do, as in this Twi sentence (Turner 1949, 211):

@nna o susuwi *se* eye okramang foforo bi.
Then he thought that [se] it was some other dog.

The case of *say* then, must be treated as a case of multiple etymology or convergence, where African sources are masked behind formally similar English forms (Cassidy 1961).

As Angela Rickford and I emphasized in a 1976 article (Rickford and Rickford 1976), *masked Africanisms* such as *say*—which can "pass" as English forms—are important because they are more likely to have survived centuries of acculturation to European languages and Eurocentric prejudices than direct African retentions such as *nyam* "eat"—which is now found only in the Sea Islands and the Caribbean, not in U.S. cities.

Having given you such a heavy dose of linguistics, I want to turn away from language now and return to folklore as my final example of

West African and Caribbean connections with the U.S. mainland. Have any of you read about slaves who could fly? Slaves flying back to Africa?

Well, the motif of Africans and African Americans who could fly has received little attention in the *scholarly* literature to date. I wrote a little about it in my 1987 book *Dimensions of a Creole Continuum.* Some of you may have come across this theme, however, in fiction, as in Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, or in poetry (Robert Hayden), or in folklore, as in Virginia Hamilton's beautiful book *The People Could Fly.* All of the examples so far are from the U.S. *mainland.*

But I first encountered this story myself on the South Carolina Sea Islands, from a middle-aged schoolteacher who told me that *her* great-grandparents had flown back to Africa after receiving a whipping. She looked me dead in the eye as she told me this, to make sure I didn't smile. And I didn't.

Subsequently, I came across dozens of other references to this motif—in *Drums & Shadows*, a 1940 book based on interviews with former slaves and other old people from South Carolina and Georgia. And in the fascinating *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*—Miguel[Migel] Barnet's book about Esteban Montejo, a Cuban slave who didn't realize slavery was ended until he was found, hiding in the forests, some time later. Esteban said that African slaves didn't escape slavery by committing suicide, as some said, but by *flying*: "They flew through the sky and returned to their own lands." He added further details, even: that the Musundi Congolese flew the most, and that they disappeared by means of witchcraft—by fastening a chain to their wrists, which was full of magic. "I knew all this intimately," he said, "and it is true without a doubt."

The connection with magic and ritual was reinforced in a story told to me in my native Guyana a few years later by Damon, then in his seventies. He said that *his* great-grandfather, a former slave from the Popo tribe, told him that when they were coming from Africa, slaves who were brought to the top decks for fresh air would form a circle and begin to chant and sing African songs. And as the rhythm grew stronger and stronger, they just took off and *flew*! After a few occurrences of this, the ship crews reportedly kept them below decks to ensure that they arrived at their New World destinations.

The motif of slaves who could fly shows up also in Jamaica, and in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana), as depicted in a portrayal of slaves with wings, from Petronella Breinburg's book of Suriname legends (referred to me by the late, great St. Clair Drake). Interestingly

enough, a different connection with ritual is established there—slaves who had eaten salt pork (typical of a slave diet) reportedly lost the magical ability to fly and plunged to their deaths.

So now we have established that the depictions of people flying in Morrison's novel or Hayden's poem or the schoolteacher's family lore are not just the products of their individual imaginations, but evidence of a theme that runs throughout the African New World—*African America*, if you will, in the broad sense that includes Cuba and Jamaica, and Guyana, and Suriname.

What is the deeper significance of this motif? Well it seems to have connections with *spirit possession* (when people, as a result of similar incantations and ritual preparations, are able to symbolically or spiritually leave their usual selves and take on the spirits of others, living and dead). And the concept of human flight is paralleled in other aspects of African American folklore, as in the case of the *hags* or *higues* who fly through the air in search of victims. Although we have so far found no exact analogs in West African folklore (we have barely begun to search), the African belief in the transmigration of the soul to the place of one's birth after death may be at the base of this recurrent theme of "flying back to Africa." More likely, however, this is one of those originally African elements that has been remodeled or reinterpreted by the experience of the Middle Passage and slavery, maybe providing a symbolic release from experiences that one could transcend in no other way. Certainly slaves who jumped into the sea during the Middle Passage, or who were beaten to death, would, by the doctrine of the transmigration of the Souls, return to Africa. But the existence of this possibility of flight—like the related belief that slaves who were being beaten could have the hurt telepathically transferred to the slave master's *wife* (Warner-Lewis 1991, 1996)—was one of the few aces that slaves had up their sleeves. It's significant in the stories that they often pulled these aces when the harshness of their New World experiences became most pronounced—for instance, after a whipping—from which it provided symbolic relief.

BRANCHES/INNOVATIONS

Now let me address the topic of innovations as well as continuities, about branches or shoots as well as roots, concentrating once again on language, my specialization.

While *be* has African and creole roots in *does be, da de*, and similar forms, it is unique in developing into the primarily habitual marker as it has, and also in developing still further now, into primarily an

auxiliary, before progressive verbs as in *I be walkin* versus *I be sick* (adj.) or *I be at home* (location). That's a complex and ongoing process that I can't discuss in detail now, but it has engaged the attention of other linguists (e.g., Bailey and Maynor 1987).

The other innovations in AAVE that are most striking are also in the preverbal or auxiliary slot:

1. Stressed BIN as marker of remote aspect or phrase "I BIN had that" = "I've had that for a long time"—NOT in the creoles.
2. Combinations of *be* and *done* to express the Future Perfect and Conditional: "Teena better watch out—she *be done* took over."
3. *Come* as a modal auxiliary, to mark the speaker's indignation: "He *come* tellin me to move as if he own the place."
4. *Finna* (from *fixin'* to) as a marker of immediate future, as in "We finna go"—present to be sure, in Southern English, but being used more extensively by northwestern African Americans, especially in this reduced form.

None of these forms is used in quite the same way in Caribbean or West African pidgins and creoles, although Bin and *come* at least have some parallels. They testify to the fact that language is constantly changing—African American Vernacular English no less than any other.

INFLUENCE FROM/TO OTHER GROUPS

Although I have stressed *African* continuities in this essay, African American language and culture has clearly borrowed from and given to other groups.

One group whose links to African Americans remain to be fully explored is the Irish. The two ethnic groups were not close in the nineteenth century—when, although both groups were linked in "For Rent" signs that said: "No Blacks Nor Irish Need Apply"—they were competing for jobs and other scarce resources in an open economic market, and often rioted against and attacked each other. But they *were* close in the seventeenth century, when they were both bond servants in the closed plantation environments of the Caribbean and colonial America—almost equally despised by the Protestant English. In those days, they would rebel together, escape and hide out in caves together, and it seems likely that forms such as habitual *does* and *does be* could have entered the creoles from Irish English itself (see Rickford 1986).

In the lending category, examples are very numerous. Labov and others have shown, for instance, that Puerto Ricans in New York City have assimilated a lot of the vernacular language of African Americans, and runaway African slaves who went to live with the Seminole Indians in Florida transmitted to them their Gullah dialect—which their Afro-Seminole descendants in Texas still speak.

Examples from other aspects of popular culture—such as the hand-slapping and high fives in sports, or the influence of African Americans on jazz, abound. One example from a different genre of music—spirituals—that I discovered recently is the Sea Island "Shout"—"I Gotta Move" as sung originally by the Georgia Sea Island Singers (Carawan and Carawan 1994). The same song, only slightly transformed, was sung and recorded subsequently by Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones (with no credit to the Sea Island source, of course).

CONCLUSION

Using thirty or more specific examples from the South Carolina Sea Islands and the U.S. mainland, I have tried to demonstrate that several aspects of African American language and culture are rooted in African traditions and paralleled in the creole language and culture of the Caribbean. Some of the continuities—such as the 4,000 African words in Gullah, or the almost exact equivalence of their baskets and mortars and pestles—are obvious, although outsiders to the Sea Islands barely know of their existence.

More subtle, more challenging, and intellectually more interesting are the continuities that exist on the mainland precisely because they have masked themselves in English [or Judeo-Christian] guise—such as *suck teeth* and the *say* of "He tell me say he gone" [or the Kongo cosmograms of the First Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia]. In this category, too, are the seemingly trivial forms such as habitual *be*, or stories of slaves flying back to Africa, which we are tempted to treat as family folklore or the products of individual imagination. Their development from African and creole roots only becomes evident when we look at them closely, from a comparative perspective, and realize that these vessels of sound and meaning convey more than referential meaning—they are silent carriers of *history*.

I have also tried to draw your attention to some innovative aspects of African American language and culture (such as stressed *BIN* and *finna*), and of some respects in which it has borrowed from and lent to other ethnic groups (e.g., in music). These are the vibrant *branches* of African American language and culture.

In closing, let me return to the words of that song by Zulema Casseaux with which I began this essay: American fruit, with African roots. Some of you may have been wondering why I might draw on this metaphor for my essay. Why "fruit"? For there is a tendency in some quarters to regard some or all of the examples of African American vernacular language and culture I have described with shame, and to deny or deprecate them, especially in public. But they are systematic, they are rooted in history, and they serve to express the ideas, social relationships, and ethnic identities of thousands of African Americans daily. In these various respects they are certainly fruit—worth cultivating, worth sharing, and worth feeding on—for sustenance and health. As Grace Nichols says in the epilogue to her wonderful opbook of poetry, *I is a long memoried woman*, "I have crossed an ocean; I have lost my tongue; from the roots of the old one, a new one has sprung!"

We came from a distant land,
Our lives already planned.
We came in ships from across the sea,
Never again, home we'd see.
And now, we've become,
American fruit, with African roots.
Mmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm.

Our masters saw we worked from morn till night,
Never given human rights
Though years passed, things remain the same,
Children born with no last names.
What is to become of these
American fruit, with African roots?
Mmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm.

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